DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 292 601 RC 016 557

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TITLE Native Indian Youth in Museums: Success in Education at the U.B.C. Museum of Anthropology.
PUB DATE Jun 87
NOTE 17p.; Paper presented at the World Conference of Indigenous Peoples' Education (Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, June 8-13, 1987).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *American Indians; Assertiveness; Cultural Education; *Cultural Enrichment; Cultural Influences; Educational Anthropology; Foreign Countries; Lecture Method; *Museums; Public Speaking; Self Esteem; Student Experience; *Training Methods; Work Experience Programs; Workshops; *Youth
IDENTIFIERS *British Columbia; *Native Indian Youth in Museums Project

ABSTRACT

In 1979, the Native Indian Youth in Museums project began placing Musqueam teenagers in the University of British Columbia's Museum of Anthropology to teach them about traditional coastal Indian culture, and train them to share this information with museum visitors. Co-sponsored by the Native Indian Youth Advisory Society and the Native Youth Program (NYP), the project is administered in two phases: a summer phase of 2 months when six to eight students work full-time in the museum, and a winter phase when they work Sunday afternoons. The total annual budget is $13,000-$15,000. Initially, the students were trained exclusively in the traditional uses of the red cedar tree, the resource used most by the Northwest Coast Indians. The students' repertoire has been expanded over the years to include lectures or guided walks introducing the museum's totem pole collection and local ethnobotany, and presentations on Indian fishing and the Potlatch (a ceremonial institution). Factors to be considered in establishing a similar project (training, staff time, how the public views the students, etc.) are discussed. Risks and benefits to the students working in the NYP, and their views of the project are also examined. Finally, it is noted that often students' school work improves after working with the NYP. (JMM)

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Native Indian Youth In Museums: Success in Education at the U.B.C. Museum of Anthropology

by

Madeline Bronsdon Rowan

Paper given at the World Conference:
Indigenous Peoples' Education
Vancouver, British Columbia
June 8 - 13, 1987

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Native Indian Youth In Museums:
Success in Education at the U. B. C. Museum of Anthropology

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INTRODUCTION

The student presentation on Northwest Coast Indian culture you have just seen is the result of a successful collaboration between native Indian people and this museum. We believe it is a model which could be adapted by indigenous people working in a variety of contexts -- museums, schools and cultural centres. Although here we have used "touchable" artifacts, audio-visual materials could be used instead of these when they are not available. I would like to tell you about the history, organization, and philosophy of the Native Youth Project (which I will now call N.Y.P.). We will have plenty of time for questions and discussion in this session, and the students will be here with us if you have more to ask them. I hope this report will inspire you to develop your own version of the N.Y.P. There will also be a manual published on the project, which I am now writing.

BASIC DESCRIPTION OF PROJECT

The project is co-sponsored by the Native Indian Youth Advisory Society, a small organization devoted to developing cultural and leadership opportunities for native youth. N.I.Y.A.S. also sponsors the native Indian theatre and training company, Spirit Song. The project is administered in two phases, a summer phase of two months in which 6 - 8 students work full time in the museum, and a winter phase in which they work Sunday afternoons.

An Indian project manager who is a U.B.C. student assists the Curator in charge. The Canada Employment Development Branch programme, Challenge 87, funds the summer phase, the office of the Secretary of State the winter phase. The total annual budget is between $13,000 and $15,000.

BEGINNINGS

The N.Y.P. began because of a need which we recognized in 1978. That year Hilary Stewart, a well-known author and lecturer, worked with us to conduct a crafts workshop for Indian children in co-operation with the local Musqueam village summer day camp. Children were introduced to some of the traditional uses of coastal flora among the Northwest Coast Indians, including the technologies associated with the cedar tree. They learned to weave cedar bark strips into plaited mats, and to make cordage, as well as simple wood carvings.

The children were supervised by Musqueam teenagers, and it rapidly became clear to us that these young people knew as little about how their ancestors had utilized the local environment as did their young charges. We decided to design a programme for these older students, one in which they would not only learn about traditional coastal Indian culture but would also be trained to share this information with museum visitors. About the same time I met and began to work with Brenda Taylor, an Indian home-school worker employed by the Vancouver School Board, who later became President of N.I.Y.A.S.

In 1979 we ran our first project, and experienced many of the problems and dilemmas which are intrinsically related to a project of this kind. Over the years we have gradually learned to handle these in more effective ways, and the project has become increasingly ambitious and rewarding.[1] Many of the solutions to these problems will be described in the manual I mentioned.

FIRST STAGE - THE CEDAR TREE

Initially the students were trained exclusively in the traditional uses of the red cedar tree. This seemed the most natural and sensible approach for several reasons. It was a resource used by most coastal Indians, the technologies and artifacts associated with it led into many areas of traditional culture, and it involved the students in physical activities which gave them a firm foundation, grounded in personal experience, fromwhich to develop their understanding and their confidence. It was also a subject which we felt could be explored with Indian elders, artists, and artisans. Hilary Stewart became a major source of information during the students' training, although we also brought in experienced native people, such as Wally Henry who had done pioneering work in making cedar bark clothing at the Mission Indian Friendship Centre in 1978. The students also met established Northwest Coast Indian artists when this could be arranged, and heard from a local Musqueam elder about aspects of native culture, including public speaking.

The first step in the students' training was a field trip to learn about the local natural environment and the cedar tree. We went to the research forest of this university to gather cedar bark, branches, and roots, and the students learned in workshops how to prepare these materials to create samples of the different processes and objects which you have seen today.

We then rapidly trained them to give their first five minutes of the 30 minute presentation, and within two weeks most of them were giving at least half of the presentation.

ADDING NEW PRESENTATIONS

Over the years we have steadily expanded the repertoire of the students. They have given lectures or guided walks which introduce the museum's totem pole collection and local ethnobotany, as well as presentations on Indian Fishing: Past and Present, and The Potlatch: Past and Present (a ceremonial institution). In all of these we try to include as much information as possible about contemporary as well as traditional native culture.

The students use the museum's theatre gallery for their short lectures, and the outdoor exhibits and grounds for their guided walks. They normally do hourly presentations for audiences ranging from 15 to 90 people.

We have incorporated study trips into their training since the first year of the project, including visits to local Indian and non-Indian museums and cultural centres in the pacific north west. These study trips are a vital part of the students' training and are almost completely funded by traditional style salmon barbeques which the students organize.

The project has changed substantially since it began. Gradually it has become more academic in content and our interviewing and selection procedures more demanding. Interestingly enough, these higher academic standards were requested by the students. The emphasis has shifted from crafts and technology to a more descriptive and historical emphasis. We select the best students we can, publicizing the project in local high schools. With few exceptions they have met our expectations and performed at consistently high levels. Ranging in age from 14 to 18, they must be attending, and returning to high school to qualify for the project.

Let's now consider running a project like the N.Y.P. from different points of view. What risks, problems, and benefits are involved? What, for example, might be the view of most museums approached to co-sponsor such a project?

First of all most museums express concern about the staff time required to design and conduct such a project. (This is aside from the predictable costs of applying for and administering government funding, and the provision of space and materials for training and presentations).

Since its beginning in the late 1940's this museum has encouraged and been committed to the involvement of native Indian people in its research and its programming. And since we moved to this new building in 1976 this commitment of the staff has been evident in all aspects of the museum's life.[2] This type of project is time-consuming for the supervisor, and during my years with the N.Y.P. I often had to delay other work for weeks at a time during the summer training of the students. Since anyone in my position, or in that of the project manager, would face a similar time commitment, let me mention the major reason the N.Y.P. can be demanding -- training.

TRAINING

Museums fret and worry about the training and performance of our other interpreters, who are usually non-native Indian volunteers. We are therefore especially concerned that these Indian students are trained to do well, and will represent well themselves, Indian people and the museum. It is particularily important that they adequately represent native culture.

Because of their youth they need personal attention and careful supervision. This is their first formal study of traditional culture and their first encounter with public speaking. Usually it is also their first job. Because they are Indian, the public expects them, unfortunately, to be very knowledgeable about Indian culture, both past and present. And the public, as most of us know, can be thoughtlessly rude if those they assume to be "experts" do not measure up to their expectations. So we train the students as well as we can in the time available, regularly asking them to write tests in order to make sure they know their information and counselling them in public speaking techniques.

I'd like now to consider the audience of the students. How do museum visitors view the students?

The relationship between the students and museum visitors is complex. Audiences warmly receive and appreciate the students' presentations. They applaud, they ask questions, they commend them on their poise, and they indicate their pleasure in hearing young Indians discuss both traditional and contemporary culture. At a more subtle and covert level they seem impressed by the very presence of the students in the museum, and by the fact that the students are learning about a way of life which has changed so drastically over the last 100 years. From their comments and questions, I also think the audience is somewhat sobered by their encounter with the students, for this encounter underlines at least three things: (1) the countless changes in traditional culture Indian people have had to endure, (2) how far removed from many of their ancestral customs some of the students are, and (3) how difficult and stressful it can be to straddle both contemporary Indian culture and that of the dominant society. The N.Y.P. brings the Indian and Indian culture, both past and present, out of the realm of museum research, conservation and stewardship into the realm of the present. This may be the single most important public educational benefit of the project, perhaps even transcending the achievements and new horizons gained by the N.Y.P. students.

What the Native Youth Project does is place contemporary native Indian people, through a discussion of artifacts and cultural information, squarely in the forefront of museum interpretation where they belong. It reveals to the public that Indians, although their life has altered, continue as a separately identifiable people still adhering to and carrying out many aspects of their traditional culture, adapting and combining these (the behaviour, values and customs) with traits of modern industrial society, or as the theme of this conference states it, the dynamics of tradition, change and survival.

Although most anthropologists and museums, and certainly most Indians, know this, most of the public do not. Among the stereotypes of coastal Indians in British Columbia is that of the "real" Indian -- wearing cedar bark clothing and living in a cedar longhouse. This stereotype is strengthened in our public school system by the fact that it is only traditional Indian culture which is taught even though the curriculum mandate states that contemporary Indian culture should be considered as well.[3] The impression conveyed is that contemporary Indians have somehow "fallen from grace" (or worse, do not exist!) because they are no longer traditional. Seldom do we present to either school children or to museum visitors the realities of Indian life today and this new public educational task can be tackled by museums and other cultural institutions.

One of the real benefits we all have experienced with the N.Y.P., therefore, is that we have catapulted ourselves, the students, and the public into a new arena -- the realm of contemporary Indian culture and race relations. We have never regretted this step, and nothing in my experience as supervisor has made me doubt the wisdom of our decision to do it.

Let's now turn to the students. What kinds of risks and benefits do they experience working in the N.Y.P.? How do they view the project?

Placing students in front of the public also runs the risk of their encountering questions and statements which are at best uncomfortable, and at worst insulting or acutely painful. Members of the public sometimes "test" the students with difficult questions as if they want evidence that the students aren't "real" Indians. Often visitors ask questions to secure an audience for a personal pet theory -- frequently irrelevant to the presentation. The students sometimes have to scramble to keep cool and to answer politely and sensibly. We have attempted to prepare them for this kind of occasional assault by asking them what we call a "tough question" (one that could be asked by a visitor) during their interview: "I understand you people have a problem with alcohol. Why is that?" If the students can handle this one, they can handle anything.

As a matter of fact, however, students do not encounter much in their work with museum visitors that they have not already encountered in "real life". And we feel that the training we give them, in conjunction

with explicit discussion of such issues, provides them with more resources with which to deal with these situations. We also try to place these issues within an historical and cultural context, an approach which is important to the students' training and brings another benefit -- education which can be helpful in completing high school or other training beyond high school.

Students also have benefitted, (although they complain in their weaker moments), from the increasingly academic quality of the project. We expect them to learn and use many of the technical or cultural terms appropriate to the subjects they discuss, and to be able to talk and write about them. The comment of one bright and able student during a summer when we had hired a girl who was a slow, nervous learner, and a poor reader was, "You know, you (the staff) have to think about who this project is for. Is it for people like Alan and me, or for people like Janet? We can really benefit and grow from it. She is slowing us down". The project has developed more rigour because of this kind of student response. They want the project to be the best it can be. In very large part the staff has responded to their ideals of excellence. Since students study, learn, rehearse and then perform together, they benefit from the experience and talents of other project members. Older students often pair with younger ones to assist them with difficult problems. This pattern of cooperation between older and younger students was, as we all know, not unknown in many indigenous cultures traditionally, and could easily be adopted in some form in the schools. Native Indian high school students could be trained to instruct elementary pupils in portions of the native studies Social Studies

curriculum, using "touchable" artifacts or local museum exhibits and materials. Not only would this give Indian students a new authority and status in the schools but it would also open eyes of many non-Indian children, and teachers, to the fact of contemporary Indian people, and the persistence and vitality of contemporary Indian life.

If other native students could experience some of the achievements discussed here, it is quite likely they would more often perform better at school, complete their education, and perhaps go on for further training. They would certainly feel more pride and confidence about being Indian.

The project has also brought benefits to both museum volunteers and paid staff.

Volunteers, the usual museum interpreters, are honest and frequently vocal about their lack of contact with Indian people. Whatever contact they have with N.Y.P. students, and other native people, cannot be anything but helpful to them. The most thoughtful and motivated volunteers will welcome a change to know more about how Indians respond to and perceive contemporary situations - including museums. Volunteers (and their museums) will be better educated as a result.

Museum staff who work directly with collections also find the technology oriented material of the N.Y.P. useful. Working with raw materials from the cedar tree and learning to prepare them for manufacturing mats, baskets and other objects schools the eye better than anything else. Knowing the tensile

strength and other physical properties of cedar branches and roots make it possible to see the cataloging errors in our own documentation and labelling of artifacts as well as those of other museums, and students can learn these skills as well. In the UBC Museum of Anthropology this information is also publicly available in our visible storage computerized data system.

Finally, N.Y.P. students can provide entertainment and instruction for a wide variety of groups, both within and outside a museum or cultural class. Our students have conducted short informal workshops and presentations for young Indian children, for the visually impaired, and for the elderly. A technology programme such as Cedar, for example, has been of interest to girl guide troups, and permits our students to enrich the training of these groups in native resource use. On the one occasion we did this it was highly successful.

Let me now turn to one last crucial question. What can the public schools - in which so many native Indian students are enrolled - learn from the N.Y.P.? Spending several hours a day for two months with half a dozen teenagers puts one in touch with the powerfully influential teenage subculture spawned by our society. High decibel, mindless, facile, and consumer-oriented teenage subculture is not a neutral influence on the young. It is in fact a poor influence. It is so completly different from, if not antagonistic to, the values which we hold dear in a liberal education, in museum education, or in traditional Indian education, that it is a wonder that anything outside the popular teenage subculture can affect the young. Getting and keeping the student's attention is not an easy task.

However, the schools may have something to learn from the N.Y.P. and not just about Indian education but about education in general. Our project is small, its success modest, but some of its ingredients and achievements could be emulated by the school system despite the enormous difference in the scale and complexity of the two encdeavours. Many of our students achieve a "C" average, at school. They do not like school very much, and they associate it with a greater or lesser degree of failure. The N.Y.P. students are not experts, not fully knowledgable about the various subjects they present, but they learn well, often even eagerly, and they are speaking to the public about what they know very quickly soon after they join the project. These are achievements, however modest, and the students see them that way. It is also worth noting that often students' high school work improves after working in the N.Y.P.

Perhaps one of the most important ingredients in these achievements is that the students know we assume they can do this work and that they will be successful. One sign of this is that our expectations are high, and the pressure is on them to learn a great deal in a short time. (Again, these expectations and pressures have been increased because of the students' demands). The assumption of success and the rewards of individual attention, praise and criticism are new experiences for most students and contrast with their school life in most cases.

In conclusion whatever success the N.Y.P. has experienced is because: of three basic things:

1. the students are paid and treated as young adult museum staff members capable of studying and giving public presentation.
2. "empowered" with knowledge, they quickly gain that satisfaction (and thrill)

of being the performers for an attentive and appreciative audience

3. what they are learning is related to their Indian identity.

As one senior student told a new younger student one summer, "You're not only going to get paid for learning all this stuff about our culture, you get to be a star".

CONCLUSION

In many years of university teaching and museum work, I have never worked with an educational project which brought more pride and pleasure than the N.Y.P. It is a project eminently adaptable to a variety of contexts, and brings benefits to all those involved: museums and cultural centres, indigenous people and the students involved.

However, the crucial partnership here for such projects to exist is between indigenous people and museums, both the existing institutions and those which indigenous people are developing. This collaboration can only stem from concern about the young andtheir future. I cannot speak for native people, but I can speak for myself and many of my colleagues. As custodians of the material dimension of native culture, all museums and culture centres consider the care and interpretation of these artifacts to be the core of their existence . . the very reason for their existence. With this custodial and interpretive responsibility in mind, many cultural institutions feel a special obligation to young native people. The youth are the descendants of the men and women who made and used these objects in the past. They should be trained and employed to interpret these, and the cultures from which they come, to a wider public. Indigenous institutions will employ their young people, of course. But we must not neglect non-indigenous museums. We need to encourage them as well to employ and train native youth to become the interpreters of their own culture.

FOOTNOTES

1. A detailed account of the N.Y.P. will be available through the U.B.C. MOA "The MOA Native Youth Project Operations Manual".

2. My deepest gratitude to Dr. Michael Ames, Director of U.B.C.'s MOA for his generous assistance in the preparation of this paper, and for his support of the N.Y.P., to Brenda Taylor and Hilary Stewart for their invaluable help, and to all the students, who made it worth it, and were such a pleasure. I am especially indebted to a paper by Dr. Ames & Claudia Haagen "A New Native People's History For Museums" given at the 1986 Annual Conference of the Alberta Museums Association.

3. The Social Studies Curriculum Guide Grade 1-Grade 7. published by the B.C. Ministry of Education Curriculum Branch, 1983 states that at the Grade 4 level: "Students should examine the culture of one of B.C.'s native people prior to contact with Europeans and in the contemporary period. In addition, students should study the culture of one other pre-contact native culture elsewhere in Canada". (Emphasis mine). Pressures on elementary teachers and the difficulties of learning about Indian life probably are at least two factors resulting in the emphasis on traditional cultures in the schools.

4. An earlier version of this paper was given at the Annual B.C. Museums Association Conference and at the MOKAKIT Indian Education Research Association in Winnipeg in the autumn of 1986. It likely will be published in the proceedings of the latter conference.